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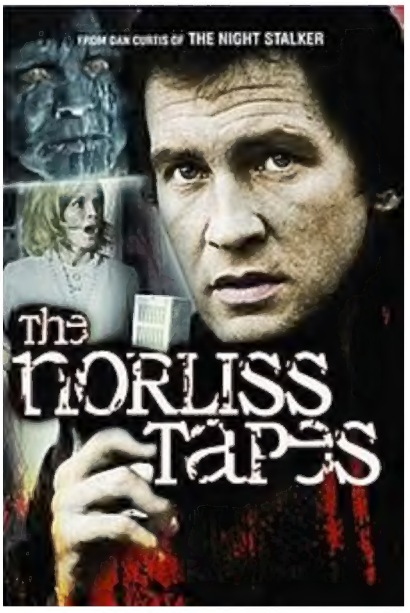
The Norliss Tapes

The Norliss Tapes is a 1973 American made-for-television horror film directed by Dan Curtis and written by William F. Nolan,[1] starring Roy Thinnes and Angie Dickinson. Framed through a series of tapes left behind by the missing Norliss, an investigator of the occult, it tells the story of his encounter with a widow and her artist husband who has returned from the dead.

The film was originally produced by NBC as a pilot for a television series which was ultimately not produced.[2] The film premiered as a standalone movie on the NBC network on February 21, 1973. Years later it acquired a modest cult following on the independent theater circuit.

The Norliss Tapes	
 DVD cover	
Written by	William F. Nolan
Story by	Fred Mustard Stewart
Directed by	Dan Curtis
Starring	Roy Thinnes Angie Dickinson Don Porter
Music by	Bob Cobert (credited as Robert Cobert)
Country of origin	United States
Original language	English
Production	
Cinematography	Ben Colman
Running time	72 minutes
Production company	Metromedia Producers Corporation
Original release	
Network	NBC
Release	February 21, 1973

Plot

David Norliss, a writer working on a book debunking spiritualists and fakers, vanishes from his home in San Francisco, California, leaving behind a series of audio tapes explaining his absence and recent investigations. The narrative unfolds as a friend, his publisher Sanford Evans, listens to the tapes.

Norliss had recently investigated an incident reported by Ellen Cort, a widow who claims that she was attacked by her recently-deceased artist husband, James, one night on their estate near Monterey. Her husband, who had been suffering from a crippling disease, became involved in the occult after meeting a mysterious woman, Mademoiselle Jeckiel, who attended one of his exhibitions. Cort says James was buried with a mysterious scarab ring that Jeckiel gave him.

That evening in Carmel, a young woman is attacked in her car, causing her to crash and die. When she is found, her skin is a dark grey, and a coroner later confirms her body was drained of blood. Norliss travels to Carmel to meet Sheriff Tom Hartley to discuss Ellen's claims. Later, Norliss and Ellen visit

James' crypt on the estate and find the ring on his hand. Norliss goes to San Francisco to meet Charles Langdon, a gallery owner who had called Ellen inquiring about purchasing James's ring. Langdon learns that the ring was buried with James and tries to steal it, but the coffin is empty. As he leaves the crypt, he is attacked by the ghoul James.

Norliss meets Jeckiel, who warns him to stay away from the Cort estate. That night, Norliss and Ellen search James' art studio, where they find a large sculpture Ellen says was not there days before. The ghoul James attacks them. Norliss shoots him several times, but James chases them out of the studio. James rips off the door of their car as they drive away. Sheriff Hartley joins Norliss and Ellen and they find James' crypt empty. Ellen's sister, Marsha, arrives at the Cort estate hoping to spend the night. When she finds nobody home, she instead lodges at a nearby motel. James breaks into the room and carries her into the nearby woods.

Norliss' research discovers a series of tunnels had been built on the Cort estate in its construction in the 1920s. Lab results on clay from the large sculpture show it includes human blood. Jeckiel arrives unannounced and tells Ellen that James made a pact with the Egyptian deity Sargoth, in exchange for his immortality, to create a sculpture through which Sargoth could enter the world. Jeckiel says that to stop James his scarab ring must be removed.

Ellen and Jeckiel search the tunnels for James and find him resting inside a pine box coffin. Jeckiel attempts to remove the ring but James awakens and grabs her. Fleeing through the tunnels, Ellen stumbles upon Langdon's and Marsha's corpses. Norliss finds Ellen in the tunnels and they emerge in James' art studio. Norliss and Ellen watch as James finishes the ritual that summons Sargoth and brings the statue to life. Norliss is able to destroy them by burning the studio to the ground in a manner that Jeckiel had specified.

Evans finishes listening to the tape, and wonders if Norliss's disappearance is related to the incident described on it. He begins to play another tape, which documents a second event.

Cast

- Roy Thinnes as David Norliss
- Angie Dickinson as Ellen Sterns Cort
- Don Porter as Sanford T. Evans
- Claude Akins Sheriff Tom Hartley
- Michele Carey as Marsha Sterns
- Vonetta McGee as Mademoiselle Jeckiel
- Hurd Hatfield as Charles Langdon
- Bryan O'Byrne as Mr. Dobkins
- Robert Mandan as George Rosen
- Ed Gilbert as Sid Phelps
- Jane Dulo as Sarah Dobbins
- Stanley Adams as Truck Driver
- Bob Schott as Sargoth
- George DiCenzo as Man In Langdon Gallery
- Patrick Wright as Larry Mather

- Nick Dimitri as James Cort

Production

Originally written under the working title *Demon*,[3] *The Norliss Tapes* was adapted from a story by Fred Mustard Stewart; writer William Nolan said that he took Stewart's basic premise of a "walking dead man" and adapted it into a teleplay that was mostly made up of his own ideas.[4]

The pilot was shot in San Francisco and Monterey, California.

Release

The film premiered on February 21, 1973.[5] It was later released on DVD for the first time by Anchor Bay Entertainment in 2006, licensed by 20th Century Fox.[6][7] The DVD, now out of print, featured theatrical trailers as bonus material.[8] In the 2000s the film underwent a brief revival on the cult movie circuit, with theatrical screenings in such locations as Toronto, New York and Los Angeles.

Critical reception

Variety said: "Curtis directed the film with an eye to tension, and that he manages. The idea behind Nolan's script has validity, with its open dependency on the supernatural. The basic thrust, to scare, is what counts, and there Nolan, Curtis, Thinnes, and company succeed.[3] *The Hollywood Reporter* also praised the film, calling it: "a lot of fun, with a new twist on the old vampire story."[3] Maitland McDonagh of *TV Guide* also praised the film, calling it "a creepy, handsomely shot bogey tale that holds up surprisingly well."[9]

In *Television Fright Films of the 1970s*, critic Dan Deal called *The Norliss Tapes* "one of the lesser entries in the Dan Curtis canon," faulting it for its "over-reliance on dialogue, shallow characterization, an unimpressive monster and too much shorthand logic."[10]

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3. Thompson 2009, p. 130.
4. Thompson 2009, p. 128.
5. Senn 2006, p. 211.
6. Anderson, Steve. "The Norliss Tapes" (http://www.filmmonthly.com/steve_anderson/the_norliss_tapes.html). *Film Monthly*. Retrieved December 22, 2016.
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External links

- *The Norliss Tapes* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070458/) at IMDb
- *The Norliss Tapes* trailer (https://www.nytimes.com/video/the-norliss-tapes-movie) at *The New York Times*

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